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SUBJECT: MGLE01: A/S SILVERBERG MEETS LEBANESE POLITICIANS
AND OPINION-MAKERS

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Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman. Reason: Sections 1.4 (b)
) and (d).

SUMMARY

11. (C) At a May 15 dinner for visiting IO A/S Silverberg, Lebanese politicians and opinion-makers of different stripes had at least one thing in common: dissatisfaction with Lebanon's current atmosphere of stagnation, impasse, and finger-pointing, especially regarding President Lahoud's tenacious grip on office, and Hizballah's on its arms. The remarkably low level of participation of women in political life was another topic of discussion. From the perspective of U.S. international organizations policy, A/S Silverberg sought to reassure her Lebanese interlocutors of the U.S. commitment to a sovereign Lebanon capable of tackling the domestic problems they had identified. End summary.

LEBANESE COMPLAIN THEIR WHEELS ARE SPINNING

12. (C) On May 15, the Ambassador hosted a dinner for visiting Assistant Secretary for International Organization Affairs Kristen Silverberg. Lebanese guests representing a range of confessional, regional, and political identities expressed frustration with a political reality that, they felt, had not lived up to high expectations raised over the past year. A somewhat harried Mohamad Chatah, Prime Minister Siniora's chief advisor, arriving late after being delayed by work, expressed amazement at how "we work so hard but do so poorly."

13. (C) "We're stuck now," complained Chibli Mallat, a lawyer and scholar in the midst of an unusual (his critics would say quixotic) public campaign for the Lebanese presidency. "National politics doesn't exist in Lebanon," he said, describing how colleagues thought he had been "crazy" to declare his candidacy for the presidency months ago in one of Lebanon's leading newspapers. While there was now widespread agreement that President Emile Lahoud "must go," Lebanon's progress had been stopped because of "the schizophrenic government he have," Mallat said.

TOO MUCH "PRAGMATISM" MAY BE A PROBLEM

14. (C) Eli Khoury, chief executive officer of Saatchi and Saatchi Levant, described the past year's events as a "revolution," and said he still considered himself to be part of it. (An advertising strategist and creative expert, he helped "brand" the pro-sovereignty movement in the demonstrations that took place following Rafiq Hariri's February 2005 assassination, through means such as the visually powerful "Independence 05" logo.) He suggested that some of the leaders of what became the "March 14 forces" (so-called for the massive demonstration that took place in Beirut on that day in 2005, a month after Hariri's assassination) had made too many compromises at the expense of principle.

15. (C) In general, Khoury said, the young people who had taken part in last year's pro-sovereignty demonstrations were more "thorough" and less willing to tolerate these compromises, while the older generation was more "pragmatic," and inclined to resort to the explanation that "this is the way things are done." Khoury said he had personally been disappointed by the kind of "pragmatism" shown by certain "March 14" leaders since then.

AOUN MP: WE DIDN'T DEFECT FROM
"MARCH 14," IT BROKE DOWN

16. (C) Ghassan Moukheiber, who won re-election to his Mount Lebanon parliamentary seat as a member of Michel Aoun's candidate list, defended Aoun and his supporters against charges that they had abandoned the "March 14" movement, first to run separate lists of candidates in the parliamentary elections of 2005, and more recently through Aoun's memorandum of understanding with Hizballah. "We didn't leave March 14," Moukheiber argued, "it broke down." At least he could claim to be from a political tradition (referring to his uncle, the late MP Albert Moukheiber, whom

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he succeeded in Parliament) that had been lobbying for Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon for three decades.

17. (C) "Till a year ago!" retorted another guest, Michel Murr -- chief executive officer of Murr Television, which was shut down in 2002 for being too pro-opposition and anti-Syrian. (Now that the ban on its operations has been lifted, it is raising funds to resume broadcasting.) Moukheiber responded by pointing out that it was the "March 14" leadership -- specifically Sa'ad Hariri and Walid Jumblatt -- that entered a so-called "quadripartite alliance" with Syria's two largest allies in Lebanon, Hizballah and the Amal Movement, to keep an unpopular but advantageous electoral law in place.

DEALING WITH SECTS AND GLOBAL EXTENSIONS...

18. (C) After some squabbling between pro-Aoun and "March 14" guests over whether the late Rafiq Hariri had been the current, Syrian-designed electoral law's biggest beneficiary or biggest victim, former Minister Ily Skaff -- a pro-Syrian "loyalist" in the days when Syrian military intelligence decided things big and small in his native Biqa'a Valley, re-elected to Parliament in 2005 as an Aoun ally -- offered a much more sweeping, if also very pessimistic, assessment. Lebanese society is made up of a variety of sects, he said, with each one tied to one foreign power or another: Shi'as to Iran, Sunnis to Saudi Arabia, and Christians to Europe and North America. "That's why we will never reach a solution," he said. (Comment: Skaff not infrequently gives us the impression he would have been happier had he been allowed to stay managing his family's ranching interests in New Zealand, where he grew up, rather than returning to carry his father's political mantle in the western Biqa'a Valley town of Zahle. End Comment.)

¶9. (C) Not everyone around the table supported Skaff's assertion. Eli Khoury rejected the idea that he, as a Christian, was following any foreigner's agenda in his Cedar Revolution activism. Ali Hussein -- while proud of his Shi'a heritage, including his perfectly Shi'a name -- was equally dismissive of the idea that he somehow took his cues from the Iranian regime.

¶10. (C) Political scientist Paul Salem described how the nature of the Lebanese political system led identity-based politics to trump issue-based politics. This was unlikely to change in the absence of genuine political parties, something Lebanon still largely lacks. The 2005 elections had seen some promising signs in this regard, in the way the "March 14" and pro-Aoun movements had conducted national campaigns in different parts of the country (comment: if not across the entire country).

¶11. (C) Hussein, whose father is former Speaker of Parliament Hussein Hussein, said that maneuvering among "March 14," Aoun, and Hizballah was a matter of "micropolitics." More important was a "macropolitical" view of the competition among regional powers for influence in Lebanon. Iran could sell a barrel of oil for around 70 dollars, and every dollar over 25 dollars was profit that could be channeled into the likes of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and Hizballah. Iran and Saudi Arabia were fighting a war in Lebanon, but waging it with barrels of oil rather than weapons, Hussein argued.

¶12. (C) The only solution, according to Hussein, was fundamentally to change the "means of production" in Lebanon. While the USG, through USAID, had done "beautiful" work near his father's constituency in the Biqa'a Valley town of Ba'albek, the people of the Biqa'a still felt they were part of a weak periphery constantly at the mercy of a hostile, grasping center, with Beirut at its core. For this reason, residents of the Ba'albek area were still pro-Syrian. Unlike the central government, the Syrians never imposed excessive taxes on them or demanded bribes in return for poorly-delivered government services. (Comment: However, the Syrian regime's military-intelligence apparatus made no secret of skimming off the top of the Lebanese economy

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elsewhere. End Comment.)

... AND WITH HIZBALLAH

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¶13. (S) Siniora's chief advisor, Mohamed Chatah, blamed Aoun for the lack of any progress in moving towards Hizballah's disarmament. Aoun's February 2006 alliance with Hizballah was qualitatively different from any of the conventional pre-election wheeling and dealing that "March 14" politicians had engaged in with Hizballah, he claimed. When Moukheiber responded by attempting to quote another guest, Chibli Mallat, to the effect that Hizballah should not be "pushed into a corner," Mallat said, "I don't think I said that. I think we should push them into a corner!"

¶14. (S) Mallat -- who is the attorney for the family of "Vanished Imam" Mousa Sadr, who led a social and political awakening among Lebanon's Shi'as in the 1960s and 1970s before disappearing in Libya -- went on to describe himself as "fed up" with Hizballah. He said he regretted publicly criticizing, a year ago, a purported U.S. "veto" over Hizballah participation in the Lebanese government. Hizballah had been allowed to join the government in the summer of 2005, he noted, but it remained as inflexible as ever on the question of its arms. Khoury suggested that Hizballah be disarmed "the same way the Syrians disarmed the Lebanese Forces," the primary Christian militia, following

the end of the 1975-1990 civil war -- that is, with the threat of the use of force. (Comment: The Lebanese Forces remain active in political life. End comment.)

WOMEN IN PUBLIC LIFE

¶15. (C) A/S Silverberg asked participants why women in Lebanon had such a minimal role in political life. MP Ghenwa Jalloul, present at the table, was one of only six women in a 128-member Parliament; she and only one other female MP could claim to be in office other than by virtue of being the wife, widow, or sister of a prominent male politician. Jalloul described how she, as a professor of computer science at the American University of Beirut, defied all odds to successfully pitch her candidacy to the late Rafiq Hariri, who agreed to include her on his list of parliamentary candidates in Beirut in 2000. She ended up trouncing the incumbent, then-Prime Minister Salim Hoss.

¶16. (C) Salem described how the national commission charged with reforming the electoral law -- of which he is a member -- had addressed the problem of extremely low women's representation in political life by incorporating a quota for female candidates in the new draft law. This would guarantee a minimum number of women on each list of parliamentary candidates, if not a minimum of successful women candidates. Moukheiber and Chatah defended this form of "affirmative action." Hussein criticized it as unfair. Why not quotas for other disadvantaged groups, he asked, such as "peasants"?

REITERATING THE U.S. COMMITMENT

¶17. (C) During this discussion among the Lebanese guests -- which was more lively than acrimonious -- A/S Silverberg briefed them on those aspects of U.S. international organizations policy directly affecting Lebanese sovereignty, including a UN Security Council resolution to follow up on the latest report of UNSCR 1559 Special Envoy Terje Roed-Larsen, and the formation of a tribunal with an international character to try those accused in the Hariri assassination, in accordance with UNSCR 1644. Taking account of the concerns and frustrations expressed around the table, she sought to reassure them of the U.S. commitment to a sovereign Lebanon with a government that was responsive to the needs of its people.

¶18. (U) A/S Silverberg cleared this message.
FELTMAN